

Seeking a sense of purpose, FBI informant decides to tell all

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Emad Salem struggled to keep the alibis, aliases and lies straight. He grew a beard; he shaved. He gained weight; he dieted. Plastic surgery reconfigured his looks.

Fearful that the Islamic terrorists he helped put behind bars wanted him dead, Salem carried concealed firearms and wore Kevlar vests. He kept a packed suitcase, ready to bolt into another life in another town. In the car, he kept a nervous eye on the rearview mirror and paused before turning the ignition, scared that the car might explode. Once late at night, he says, he mistook his son for an intruder and nearly shot him.

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Two decades have passed since Salem went deep undercover for the [FBI](#) and infiltrated the terrorist cell behind the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. After the explosion, he helped the FBI bring charges against a related group of terrorists for a separate plot to blow up tunnels and bridges and other New York landmarks.

In that case, for 46 days in 1995, he testified as the government's star witness in a federal courthouse in Lower Manhattan.

Then Salem disappeared.

He and his wife slipped away into a world of hiding — a lonely, stressful life, separated from old friends — and raised a son and a daughter who could not understand the dangers around them. The family bounced from state to state in the federal witness protection program.

Now at 64, with no job, no home equity and no pension, Salem decided to talk about his past.

He's hoping to recapture a splash of the old fame, notoriety and sense of purpose that made him one of the FBI's most valuable — and vilified — government informants.

He used his real name to start a website and to self-publish a memoir (with a second underway). He is trying to fashion himself as a consultant on the murky world of Islamic terrorism and undercover work. He gives seminars to law school students and FBI recruits.

After blowing through the \$1 million he says he received from the U.S. government, Salem toiled as an innkeeper, sold jewelry wholesale, taught karate and scuba diving, ran a juice bar and worked as a masseur.

"I'm tired of all that," said Salem, who agreed to two days of interviews at an open-air restaurant here on Florida's Gold Coast. "It is time for me to talk now. I was shut up for 20-some years."

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Salem was born in Egypt, where he served in the military for 18 years, rising to the rank of army lieutenant colonel. In 1987, he emigrated to the United States. He worked in New York as a security guard at an off-Broadway hotel, and was recruited by the FBI to monitor hotel guests suspected of being Russian

mobsters.

In time, the undercover assignments grew. When El Sayyid Nosair stood trial in New York for killing a militant rabbi in 1990, Salem infiltrated his supporters. Soon he became head of security for their leader, Omar Abdel Rahman, known as the blind sheik.

He says he has carried a good measure of guilt because shortly before the bombing of the World Trade Center, he refused to wear a hidden FBI microphone and dropped out of the undercover work. He told agents wearing a wire was too risky and might bring harm to him or someone in his family. He later regretted that decision, saying he could have saved the six lives lost in that attack.

"I could have stopped it," he said. "But I failed."

To ease that guilt, Salem volunteered in 1993 to return to the terrorist cell to try to nail the conspirators in the second plot to detonate New York landmarks, including the United Nations building. This time he wore a wire.

Salem's testimony in 1995 led to several convictions, including those of Abdel Rahman and Nosair. Both were given life sentences without parole.

"He really did care about trying to help this country," said Andrew McCarthy, the lead federal prosecutor in Abdel Rahman's case. Salem, McCarthy said, was "patriotic and very brave."

But McCarthy also said Salem sometimes made up stories about his exploits in Egypt and elsewhere. "And he had a bad relationship with the FBI, with the institution."

Salem and his family were whisked into the federal protection program just moments after he left the witness stand.

"It all began abruptly, out of nowhere," said his son, Tom Fox, now 31. "One day I was told I had an hour to get everything together, and we had to go. I packed a small, little suitcase. My clothes. A few toys. My little action figures, a little monster truck."

Salem and his family found it difficult to leave their past behind.

Once, they were in a fancy steak restaurant when Salem saw a man who resembled a terrorist cell member. He hurried his family out.

Another time, his daughter blurted out his real name in school. The family moved, Salem said.

Not long ago in Florida, Salem said, he spotted a van behind his Surf N Spray hotel, with suspicious characters lurking inside. The sighting led him to relocate his family.

"We moved so many times, it became a habit," his son said. "I can't remember it all."

Salem says the family has lived in New Jersey, Minnesota, Tennessee, California and now Florida.

He still uses an alias in daily life and wants to change it once again to protect his real identity. He also wants to leave South Florida.

Before he went underground, Salem was described by friends and colleagues as distrustful and sometimes erratic. He secretly taped his FBI handlers and suggested they had ignored warning signs about a pending

attack, allegations the FBI strongly denied.

Life in witness protection may have only heightened his anxieties.

His apartment is wired with a motion detector, though only he and his wife, Karin, live there now that the children have grown. He frequently checks a cellphone app that monitors any activity outside his house. The phone vibrates if someone approaches the front door.

He has installed the security measures himself. Once known as No. 6220 in the protection program, he says he lost his government protection after his sister moved back to Cairo, and U.S. law enforcement officials felt they could no longer guarantee his safety should someone learn his whereabouts through her.

He's certain Al Qaeda wants revenge. He can still hear the blind sheik in the courtroom, jumping to his feet and issuing a *fatwa* — a death sentence — against him. "You are Satan!" Abdel Rahman screamed at Salem.

Salem's attorney, Joseph Brien, cautioned him against going public. "The higher his profile, the bigger the target he will become," Brien said. "There is still the *fatwa* with his name on it. It's still out there. The fanatics still have him in their sights."

Bernard Kleinman, attorney for World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, dismissed the notion that Salem remained in any danger from Islamic militants bent on vengeance. "That's a little bit dramatic," Kleinman said.

Suzane Doucette, one of Salem's former FBI handlers who teaches law at the [University of Arizona](#) in Tucson, has brought him in to speak to her national security law students. At first, she said, he appeared behind a shroud.

"It's a very stressful way to live," she said. "You never get to tell anybody what you did. The first time he came to my class it seemed like such a catharsis for him to be able to talk about it."

Now, Salem is giving interviews for the first time in years and is selling his first self-published book, "Undercover," on Amazon. His next, to be called "On the Run," will describe his life in the witness protection program. The cover of that book, shown on his personal website, features Salem in sunglasses and a long trench coat with a big red bull's-eye on his chest.

Despite his new openness, he says, he has not let down his guard.

In public, he often wears a hat and dark glasses, carries a Glock pistol hidden under his sports jacket and a Smith & Wesson strapped to his ankle.

"Do you know how many times I touch my gun and make sure the safety is off?" he said during the Hollywood Beach interviews.

He also keeps a gun under his bed, another in the desk, three more in the car.

If terrorists find him, he says, "all I know is I'm not going to be taken alive."

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